



U.S. Coast Guard Oral History Program

Attack on America: September 11, 2001 and the U.S. Coast Guard

U.S. COAST GUARD ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
Operation Noble Eagle Documentation Project

Interviewee: Rear Admiral Robert Dennis Sirois, USCG
Director of Reserve and Training (G-WT)

Interviewer: PAC Peter Capelotti, USCGR
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Place: RADM Sirois' Office

Q: Well I usually start these interviews Sir by just asking how did you find yourself in this office on 9/11?

RADM Sirois: I wasn't.

Q: I know you weren't physically here but how did your career path take you here for being an Admiral in the Reserve?

RADM Sirois: Like many admirals, for example [the Assistant Commandant for Marine Safety and Environmental Protection (G-M), Rear] Admiral [Paul J.] Pluta, it's easy to see. He worked his way up through the Marine Safety field. But the Director, Reserve and Training is like a lot of jobs - like Director, Military Personnel - it is not really a career path to that. So it's whatever jobs are open and what the Commandant thinks the best fit is. Fortunately my background, I had been Director of the Auxiliary out in Hawaii, so I'd had experience with a big different part of our workforce. There are some similarities and differences between the Auxiliary and the Reserves, of having worked with the volunteer side. It prepared me a little bit to work here.

Q: Had you had much interaction with the Reserves *per se* before you were here?

RADM Sirois: Oh sure, particularly in . . . well throughout my career on ships I've had a number of reservists assigned to the ships. Not as many as I'd liked. And then in the 14th, and when I was Chief of Operations, the Command Center had all kinds of reservists who were great. Some have been there ten years. Talk about continuity. And the same thing when I went to PacArea; I was the Chief of Staff there and we had a large contingent at Coast Guard Island there.

Q: Is the senior leadership . . . do they think of the Reserves at all in that sense; in that sense of continuity?

RADM Sirois: Absolutely, no doubt. When you get a person that's at an MSO [Marine Safety Office] for maybe an entire career . . . I mean talk about . . . especially if the reservist is in any way connected with the maritime community, talk about a double dipper.

Q: Right. One of the phrases I've heard out in the field in my travels, since I've been to every District except one now, is that the Reserves are often thought of in thirds; that you get the third in a crisis that shows up before they're called, the third that shows up when they're called, and the third that can't be found no matter how much you call them. And I wonder if that's also a feeling on the part of planners that you've got these highly trained PSUs [Port Security Units] that are armed to the teeth; trained about as highly as you can be trained and ready to go in 24-hours notice. Is there a sense of that; that there's a spectrum to the Reserves?

RADM Sirois: No. We've worked hard to weed out the folks that aren't drilling. We've weeded out about 150 people. We've said, either start drilling or go to the IRR [Individual Ready Reserve]. We've done that. And after that pretty much everyone's contributing; doing their drills.

Q: The other side of that coin is that you're in the middle of trying to build the Reserve up.

RADM Sirois: Yes.

Q: How's that going and what are your current numbers?

RADM Sirois: We're about 7,800 right now. That number's down because we've been weeding out some of the non-performers. We've never had a big commitment to recruiting and we've changed that. We have increased mobile recruiters from six to thirty six, so they'll be all trained and hitting the streets this summer. You know you can't recruit people if you don't dedicate a good cadre of recruiters. This is in addition to the folks we have at the Coast Guard Recruiting Command.

Q: Right. The latest numbers that I had heard tossed around were that the Coast Guard wants to build to something like 17,000 Reserves.

RADM Sirois: No, it's a minimum of 12,000. There's a Reserve Requirements Study that's just finished that we briefed to the Chief of Staff on Friday. So that will be the new number if that's approved by him and sent up to the Commandant.

Q: Can we get there within a reasonable amount of time? What's the timeframe plan to get there?

RADM Sirois: Well we think we can do a thousand a year but that's really pushing hard, because not only is recruiting an issue with training center capacity, we're also growing the active duty at the same time. So we're looking at a lot of unique ways to train a lot of folks; maybe with contractors, maybe with select places around the Coast Guard that would have the physical capacity to be like a mini-training center, and we're going to leverage a lot more distance training in simulators. The industry's finally come out with some small boat simulators that we think can really help out . . . you know Boatswain's Mates [BMs] are the thing today. Anybody that can drive a boat is in high demand. So we're focusing a lot of resources on MKs [Machinery Technician], Gunner's Mates [GMs], PSs [Port Security Specialists], all those rates; the demand has skyrocketed.

Q: So when they told me to transfer to a BM eight years ago, or said not to because that was a dead rate, that was bad advice?

RADM Sirois: That was a bad move. (Laughter)

Q: Well, in fact, one of the side results of this project has been that my Captain submitted a proposal to the Chief of Staff about a month ago to have a historian in every District, which they approved, and that would be a civilian supported by Reserve teams. And what we're looking at now are Reserve teams that would be recruited, irrespective of rank or rate, just based on their historical training.

RADM Sirois: Yes, I know we've got some unbelievable folks in the Reserve as you well know.

Q: Well one of things that I didn't know when I interviewed [Master Chief Petty Officer of the Coast Guard] Vince Patton a few months ago is he said that there were 52 enlisted Reservists with Ph.D.s, and so we're trying to get a breakdown, and there's got to be a few history Ph.D.s in there somewhere.

RADM Sirois: But a lot of those guys don't want to do what you're doing.

Q: Well that's right.

RADM Sirois: They want to drive boats.

Q: I'm an anthropologist but I joined to drive a boat. I get enough of that crap in the classroom.

RADM Sirois: You know you've got lawyers and they say "I want to drive a boat."

Q: Exactly. Fortunately history's one of those things that a lot of people want to do. Of course a lot of people who want to do it are engineers. Can I ask you what your sense of the Reserve was on 9/10? One of the figures I searched for took me about two months to find when I came onboard was the number of reservists on active duty on the 10th of September.

RADM Sirois: I think it was roughly 500.

Q: The figure I got was 984.

RADM Sirois: What, Extended Active Duty [EAD]?

Q: EAD as well as the Reservists supporting the Reserve component and the Active component.

RADM Sirois: No, EAD and ADSW we had about 500.

Q: I can send you the email.

RADM Sirois: Well who's it from?

Q: This was from [Lieutenant] Commander [Darrell L.] Prather.

RADM Sirois: No, I can call up there.

Q: [Coast Guard Chief of Staff, Vice] Admiral [Timothy W.] Josiah said the same thing to me. He said, oh, that can't possibly be. That can't be possible. It must have been about three or four hundred.

RADM Sirois: This is 9/10, right?

Q: Right.

RADM Sirois: No, I'll give you the correct number.

Q: I'll send you those figures. I asked Personnel for the people that they were paying that were Reserves and the figure that they came up with was 984.

RADM Sirois: Well there might have been people drilling that day.

Q: No, this was irrespective. I suppose they could have lumped that in, but what I wanted was not so much specifically 9/10 as a day, but the number of people they had under contract.

RADM Sirois: That's way too much.

Q: Yes, because I think if you include the 2,750 or so that were mobilized after the 11th, if you added that number to it you'd have something like 47 percent of the Reserve. And as you say, if you include the 150 or so that aren't drilling you're up close to 50 percent of the Reserve, so you essentially don't have a Reserve at that point. You're basically stretched the limit.

RADM Sirois: Well you've still got 4,000 and you've got the IRR [Individual Ready Reserve].

Q: Do you remember where you were that morning? You weren't here in your office.

RADM Sirois: I was about a half mile from the Pentagon and I was in a Reserve Force Policy Board meeting.

Q: Do you remember what kind of issues they were talking about that morning?

RADM Sirois: Well we weren't into any issues yet. We were just getting some introductory remarks. Dr. [David S. C.] Chu, who is the Under Secretary for Personnel and Readiness, had just made a presentation. In fact I was waiting for [Department of Transportation] Secretary [Norman] Minetta to show up because he was going to be one of the keynotes. Someone walked in and said a plane had hit the World Trade Center. Of course the pagers were going off like crazy with all the Reserve Chiefs there and the other senior Defense officials. So they rolled in a TV and we were watching that, and watched the second plane hit. My assistant; Commander Rousch (phonetic), he was trying to contact the building here and he went out in the parking lot, and I think he was talking to either the building or to his wife when the plane that hit the Pentagon flew right over where we were.

Q: So you could hear that?

RADM Sirois: Oh yes.

Q: And you were inside a building at that point?

RADM Sirois: At the Army/Navy Country Club there. Yes, it was very low and we heard the explosion when it hit the Pentagon. Of course by that time all bedlam broke loose and all the senior Defense officials were getting in their cars and I don't think they would make it back to the Pentagon.

Q: Where did you go?

RADM Sirois: I tried to get back here and I couldn't. The roads were just clogged. So I made my way home. Trying to get through there would have been impossible. So finally when I was able to get home -

because you couldn't use a cell phone - then I started talking to the office. They had already advised the Commandant to seek approval from the Secretary to immediately mobilize the Reserve and that took one phone call from the Commandant to the Secretary.

Q: I have a copy of this . . . it's actually dated the 14th . It's actually got two dates on it. But it talks about terrorist elements appear to be involved in the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Virginia, and the State Department in Washington, so this one must have been written within just a couple of hours or less.

RADM Sirois: Well that's September 11th. This is the . . .

Q: This is where they're asking the SecTrans for Title 14 authority.

RADM Sirois: Yes, but he did that on the phone the morning of the 11th.

Q: What sort of issues did you have to deal with as the Head of Reserve to coordinate this, or do you? What sort of action transpires between you and the front office and you and the units in the field?

RADM Sirois: Very little between the front office. You know, it's one of those quick reaction cards that they've got in the Command Center that's already been laid out. And, you know, we do this on a regular basis for floods and hurricanes and tornados, so it's . . .

Q: Is there a qualitative difference in feeling between a 14 mobilization and a 10?

RADM Sirois: Just that Title 10 affords the Reservists much more protection.

Q: But there's no sense that now we're into a much deeper crisis or situation, or something?

RADM Sirois: Oh certainly, certainly. It takes the President to authorize Title 10 Authority.

Q: I have the . . . this is the Title 10.

RADM Sirois: Right. Yes, on Friday I took part in a news broadcast over at the Pentagon itself. The Secretary of Defense was there and then the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Reserve Affairs spoke, and then they asked all the Reserve Chiefs to make some remarks, so I had too. I've got to note that - you know, the Coast Guard Reserve, being different from the DoD Reserve - that the Secretary has this unique authority, and on the evening of 9/11 we had 700 Reservists already mobilized and on duty. And by that, I'm not sure if it was that Friday or the Friday after, we had 1,400 already mobilized. Well many of the National Guard folks of course, under the states, particularly New York, the Governor called them up immediately. But that was under the State Call Up, not the Federal Call Up.

Q: Does your office concern itself with planning or operations of how those Call-Ups are going to be handled, or where those units are going to go? Who tasks them?

RADM Sirois: Well the Area Commanders and the District Commanders.

Q: Is there anything that this office does to support those needs? In terms of after 9/11 it was every port seemed to need a port security unit there.

RADM Sirois: I don't apportion forces. I recruit, train and deliver to the field commanders. They determine that.

Q: In the last couple of years has there been an uptake in the request for those? I mean how have you been planning for how many port security units you needed, say before 9/11?

RADM Sirois: The Assistant Commandant for Operations; that's his job to determine.

Q: And then he would task you or say this is what I need?

RADM Sirois: I need, you know, I need X many PSUs. Go out and recruit them and train them. But I don't set the requirements. "O" & "M" set the requirements.

Q: Has there been a recognition or was there recognition soon after 9/11 that more units were needed or there was going to be a request for more units?

RADM Sirois: There's been recognition for ten years that we need more PSUs, particularly as we support the CinC War Plans, and there are far more requirements in those war plans than the six PSUs that we do have. But it's all, where do you put your resources? That's a risk management . . .

Q: Right. Did you see resources coming your way in terms of standing up new units after 9/11?

RADM Sirois: Oh absolutely. But there was a sense over the last couple of years, you know, working with the Commandant and the Chief of Staff and others, that 8,000 just wasn't right. We had had close to 15,000 ten, 12, 13 years ago. We just found a document from 1988 where it said we really need 25,000 reservists.

Q: When I joined in '88 we had about 12,500 and everyone kept saying, you're all going to 25,000, or it's going to double in the next five years. And of course it almost cut in half in the next five years. But my unit was stood up to guard the port of Providence in the event of a major war in Europe. And when that all went away in 1991 so did the unit for all intents and purposes.

RADM Sirois: Well if we all have a good crystal ball it would be great.

Q: How much of the issues that spun out of these deployments using the use, if not over use, of Reserve port security units, comes up to your level? How much of that stuff do you hear?

RADM Sirois: Well all of it. My Master Chief's on the road constantly so he gives me unfiltered feedback.

Q: And what kind of things have you been hearing?

RADM Sirois: Just that it's starting to wear around the edges; the number of deployments. We need to start looking at some kind of relief. Actually, and you well know, the Reserves want predictability. We tell them two years from now your unit's going to deploy for six months and neither of them are not going to deploy. People complain to get their mind set. So we'd like to get to that model. Who would have predicted this, you know, the [U.S.S.] *Cole* [DDG-67] incident, and everything that's happened, that we'd be deploying our PSUs to the level that we are?

Q: Right. Was there anything about the operations for the Reserves after 9/11 that you felt the Reserves weren't prepared for?

RADM Sirois: No, I think the Coast Guard in general, you know, weapons training for everybody. Not just Reserves, everyone. We had let that get behind. Many places did away with armories. So it wasn't just Reservists. You know the training for Reservists is just like training for the active duty. You never have enough training. So it's harder for Reserves, given the time that they have to devote to training, because we are getting so technically oriented. There are more requirements for training so it's harder

for the Reservists to keep up. That's why we've authorized a lot more days of training in the last couple of years. We've authorized four more drills for everyone and the PSUs have 64 days to drill.

Q: Could you speak a little bit to that issue of weapons quals? Is that now a settled issue with the senior leadership from your point of view; that it was a mistake to let those sort of slide for the last five or ten years?

RADM Sirois: I'm not sure it's a mistake. You know, what's the threat? For years we had seen in the port of Saint Louis, is there a threat? So you do a risk management thing. I mean where do we put our priorities? And weapons training fell off the table in light of a higher priority requirement at the time. It's always easy to be a Monday morning quarterback.

Q: Is there a sense that it's back on the table for good now?

RADM Sirois: Oh absolutely, yes. It's going to be a heavy lift, a heavy lift.

Q: In what sense? Is it just the training or is it standing up 200 new weapons lockers and all the rest of those sorts of things?

RADM Sirois: Oh sure; armories, training, the weapons themselves, ammunition. But all those resources are in the supplemental bills.

Q: Right. So as far as the leadership is concerned that's a settled issue now?

RADM Sirois: Yes.

Q: The Reserve will see that coming down the line?

RADM Sirois: Yep.

Q: Has there been any discussion, or much discussion - since so much of the Reserve is made up of public safety folks in civilian life - can you recall any discussions of how this, the Reserves, not just in terms of deployments but in terms of civilian career balance between the Coast Guard taking these folks away from jobs that are needed for essentially the same mission at Homeland Security?

RADM Sirois: You're like between a rock and a hard place. Do we recruit those people? Yes, we don't turn them away.

Q: Has that been discussed at all that these folks are now essentially doing the same thing on the home front?

RADM Sirois: Well it's discussed here. It's discussed in the Pentagon. See, the Pentagon has a large number of people in their security forces that are policemen and firemen, so they have the same problem. It's the same type of people that like that type of work.

Q: Sure. Does that interfere at all with whatever decisions are made about rotations, to get these folks back to their home police department or their home fire department, or does that not enter into it at all?

RADM Sirois: No, it's just Reserve. We're at large, you know. We need to not use them like an active duty unit, whether they're policemen or lawyers. That doesn't enter the discussion.

Q: Do you see if Port Security is needed in Bahrain let's say, that at some point that's going to have to be handled by full time active duty military?

RADM Sirois: Yes, it could be, and the Navy's building up some of their own security-type forces.

Q: How much interaction do you have with, say, [the Director, U.S. Navy Command Center and Counter Drug Division, Rear] Admiral [Jeffrey J.] Hathaway and the Force Protection folks over at the Pentagon?

RADM Sirois: Periodically. He does more interaction with Operations than with me.

Q: Where do you see the Coast Guard Reserve in five years?

RADM Sirois: Where do I predict it's going to be in five years?

Q: I know that we've talked about crystal balls, but...

RADM Sirois: Well I think we've proved that our integration model works. The other Services are looking now at our model.

Q: In what sense does it, you think, work best? I mean what about the situation since 9/11 has caused you to feel that way?

RADM Sirois: Just the way everyone reacted and ready to go as a team. How flexible we were. You know DoD, it took them weeks if not months to mobilize people, and mobilization stations, and they bring people in and process them. And ours was just a piece of paper and turn you up for work the same place you always turn up for. Except for our PSUs, people drill where they mobilize.

Q: One of the things that, well I haven't experienced first-hand, but I've certainly heard it from a number of Reservists is that's true. But one thing that we've lost is - with the death of the Reserve unit - is administrative support.

RADM Sirois: That's an issue that's on my plate. We had a full time Support Study that identified just that issue. And my office . . . we've been pushing very hard in the budget to restore some of that full time support. You've got to look at what admin support those Reserve units did provide. When they went away we didn't plus up the active duty units with that piece of admin support; that virtual admin support that the units provided. So that's the piece we're trying to restore.

Q: One of those things when you got rid of the Reserve unit, you got rid of your yeomen, your Training Officer, your Support Officer and all the rest.

RADM Sirois: Yes, exactly. So that was one of the unattended consequences.

Q: Has there been any discussion of when there is a surge like this that some of the first people that should be surged are yeomen to Topeka, Kansas?

RADM Sirois: Absolutely. One of the options instead of more full time support may be half as much and have a Mobilization Pulse.

Q: Right, sure.

RADM Sirois: That's all they do, is when they mobilize that's what they are there for.

Q: So that actually has been under discussion?

RADM Sirois: Absolutely. Like Training Center Yorktown processed all PSU-305 with one or two yeomen and that was a miracle that they got all those people processed in that short period of time.

Q: Are there any other issues like that that have spun out of 9/11 that have come to your desk?

RADM Sirois: All the medical issues. We knew that before 9/11, that medical coverage or continuity coverage for Reserves . . . fortunately DoD, you know, with the stroke of the pen took care of all that with this Demonstration Project. A lot of the requirements were waived, so I see down the road . . . we've been talking at the Reserve Chiefs' meeting as maybe all Reserves ought to be under DoD healthcare and your employer can buy in . . . it's probably cheaper for your employer to buy DoD health coverage.

Q: Oh my employer's thrilled that I'm on active duty. They can replace me with somebody at half the salary.

RADM Sirois: But they'd buy health insurance from the government for you and that way there is no problem when we mobilize. You're already on the same program so that and many other things were under discussion.

Q: In terms of integrating with active duty units; MSSTs [Maritime Safety and Security Teams] and so forth, do you see the Reserves playing any role there?

RADM Sirois: Oh sure. A third of the MSSTs is going to be Reserves.

Q: Is that right?

RADM Sirois: Yes. I think there's going to be about 70 active duty and 33 Reservists in each MSST.

Q: Do you see those serving . . . you taking anything from the PSU model or essentially rewriting the book for Port Security operations?

RADM Sirois: Oh absolutely. The PSU model is what's going to be built on.

Q: Yes.

RADM Sirois: In fact the training's being done at the same place; the PSU Trainer at Camp Lejeune.

Q: At Camp Lejeune, Yes.

RADM Sirois: You ought to get down there sometime too.

Q: I was invited by the [PSU] 305 to see what they're doing. I've got one more trip. My Admiral wants me to go to MSO [Marine Safety Office] Galveston in Houston. He says I need to see the ship channel so I can see what the problem is that they have to deal with. [The Commander, Eighth Coast Guard District, [Rear] Admiral [Roy J.] Casto already told me about the run-in from the sea buoy into New Orleans and now I need to see the other side of it. In the days and weeks after 9/11 what sorts of information were you being asked to provide about the Reserves, or what kind of questions were coming in about the support of the Reserve Force?

RADM Sirois: Well the whole issue of things like how many students are being affected? How are we going to deal with those? But most of our Reserve issues, because we're integrated, are handled at the local level.

Q: Right. One big issue that I could see hitting your desk that seems to come up every time the Reserves mobilize in a large scale is that everybody rushes into the breach in the crisis. Then about a month or two later somebody holds up a card that says this is really costing us way too much money. Does that happen in this situation as well?

RADM Sirois: Of course. It's better to go big early than too little too late. And the Secretary authorized the entire Ready Reserve to be called up, not just the Selected Reserve [SELRES].

Q: What kind of number would you be looking at if that were the case? I mean if you were to call in everybody what would you have at your disposal?

RADM Sirois: 12,500, you know, if you can find all the IRR folks.

Q: And that includes everybody in the IRR, everybody of SELRES, individual mobilization augmentees, and all the rest.

RADM Sirois: Right.

Q: Do you have a mandate or any kind of unwritten or written rule about, in a situation like this, as to how long the Reserves stay around, how long financially they can be supported?

RADM Sirois: Well of course that's determined by how much money OMB [Office of Management and Budget] and then Congress authorizes.

Q: So if they wanted to keep the Reserves around they would have had to . . . then say we're going to pay for them over the long term.

RADM Sirois: But that's why a lot of the laws read the way they do. The Secretary can call up so many Reservists under Title 14 but they're restricted by number of days. And I think that's been a forethought, that there is a bill you have to pay for this.

Q: Do we have a number like they do in "O"? I know that for some of these guys it's \$8,136.00 per hour to run a C-130. Do we have those kinds of figures for the Reserves, like how much the Reserve costs us per day?

RADM Sirois: Yes, absolutely. Commander Weber can give you that data.

Q: That's Commander Weber?

RADM Sirois: Right.

Q: Do you get those kinds of data calls from above; what's this costing us?

RADM Sirois: All the time. Yes, you've got to be mindful of the cost. People are expensive.

Q: Where do you see . . . ?

RADM Sirois: Chief, I've got to go here shortly.

Q: Sure. I just have one more question for you Sir. Has this done anything, this whole situation done anything to the image of the Reserves?

RADM Sirois: Absolutely. I hear it from the District Commanders all the time. You know, I couldn't do it without the Reserves; I couldn't do what we're doing.

Q: Has that made your life easier in terms of making requests for training facilities and so forth?

RADM Sirois: Well it's neat because I can ask myself for training facilities because I do both. (Laughter)

Q: And approve them!

RADM Sirois: That's right. But no, I think there was a great awareness before 9/11 of the value of the Reserves. After we streamlined . . . Reservists, we couldn't do our daily job without our augmentees. We just couldn't. We definitely couldn't do it after 9/11.

Q: Well Sir, thank you. I want to thank you for your time, and good luck in your new assignment.

RADM Sirois: Yes, come down and visit.

END OF INTERVIEW

